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OUTLOOK BUSINESS

February 6, 2015 | ₹ 50

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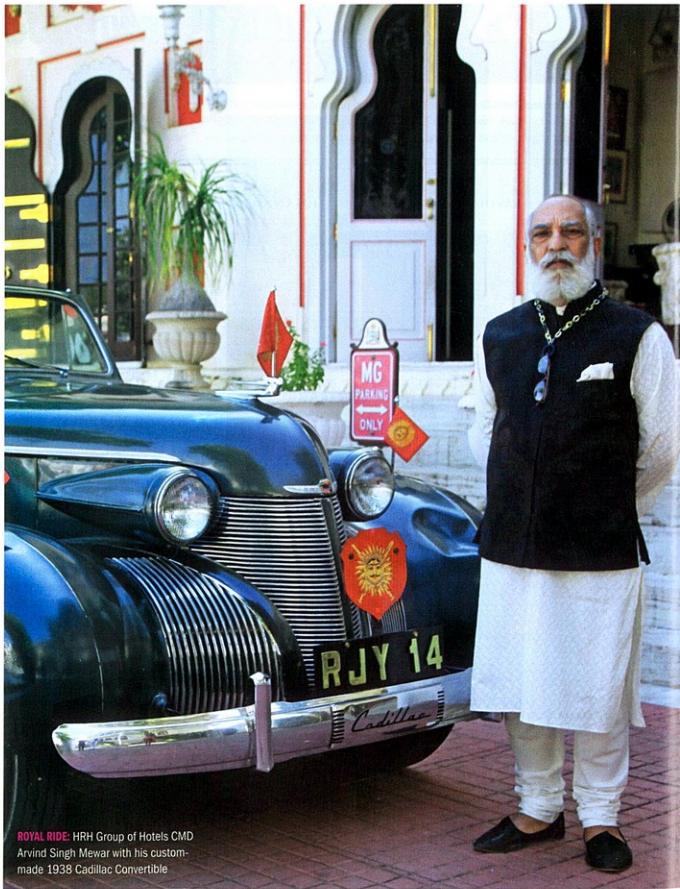
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Exclusive Interview

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ROYAL RIDE: HRH Group of Hotels CMD Arvind Singh Mewar with his custom-made 1938 Cadillac Convertible

A royal vintage

UDAIPUR ROYALTY ARVIND SINGH MEWAR ON WHY HE IS WORKING HARD TO PRESERVE HIS FAMILY'S FAMED CAR COLLECTION – AND THE CITY'S HERITAGE

Mahithi Pillay

As super nerdy teens, my brother and I would spend a significant part of our vacations back home in Udaipur exploring the heritage section of the city, attracted by the royal family's collection of lovingly preserved vintage cars. Revisiting the city a decade later, I realise that nothing has changed – the cars still occupy centre stage at the Vintage & Classic Car Collection (VCCC) museum at one of Historic Resort Hotel (HRH) Group's stately properties, winning awards and recognition.

Both the collection and the HRH Group of Hotels are part of the inheritance group CMD Arvind Singh Mewar – or Shriji, as he is referred to – says he strives to maintain. "We have inherited an identity that will disappear if it is not preserved. As custodians, we don't really own this heritage, so we do our best to preserve it," he says during our meeting at the Shambhu Niwas Palace. The custodianship is a reference to the title the Mewar dynasty retains, terming Eklingji, the locally worshipped form of Lord Shiva, as king instead.

The HRH Group was set up as a means for the Mewar royals to establish cash flow and preserve their palaces by turning them into heritage hotels, chief among them the Lake Palace in the heart of Lake Pichola, now managed by the Taj group. Shriji is credited with utilising his education and training in hotel management to make the business professional. "In the past, heritage hotels used to be considered a poor relative of star hotels. There was a potential for such buildings to be converted into hospitality initiatives but no one had thought about it. It has been a

HOT WHEELS



WINNER TAKES ALL: The 1924 RR 20 HP GLK 21, which made a transatlantic trip



GHOST WHO WALKS: The 1934 RR Phantom II featured in Bond flick *Octopussy*

lone battle for us but just see how popular the hotels are today."

Apart from cricket, polo and flying microlite aircraft, the VCCC has been one of Shriji's abiding passions. It was thrown open to the public for a fee in 2000; notable exhibits include a 1934 Rolls-Royce (RR) converted to accommodate the Mewar cricket team, a 1947 Chevrolet bus and truck, two jeeps used in WWII and a 1934 RR Phantom II used in Bond flick *Octopussy*. It also features a pair of custom-made 1938 Cadillacs used by the royal couple during functions.

Though a team of mechanics carefully tends to the cars, restoration is another matter. When Shriji chanced upon the 1924 RR 20 HP GLK 21, till then cannibalised for parts in the royal garage, he decided to get it restored to its former glory. Says Anu Vikram Singh, keeper, VCCC, "The process took ten years but it was worth it as this is the only such car in India to win an international award [the Lucius Beebe Trophy at the Pebble Beach Concours d'Elegance, California]."

"The event is by invitation only, so that was a big deal in itself. The permissions, transportation and other costs didn't come easy either. Maintaining these cars needs the same level of management and logistical input as the hotels. But if you want to pursue anything, you need to make time." One look at the thriving city from the palace grounds, and it is clear that the time and effort have paid off. ☺